

Interview

Social Sciences in Crisis: A Dialogue with Professor Neil Smelser on the Future of Social Sciences

Professor Mahmoud Dhaouadi is a sociologist at the University of Tunis, Tunisia. As part of his Fulbright Research on “the State of American Sociology Today,” he interviewed Professor Smelser on January 5, 2001, director, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California. Here are some excerpts.

DHAOUADI: Based on my own observations and impressions, one talks more about sociology as a discipline having a crisis, than about psychology or political science. How do you respond to that?

SMELSER: I heard this kind of talk among sociologists. Among the questions raised in their frequent conversations are: What is the field about? What are the boundaries about? Is it (sociology) fragmented? Is it practiced ... etc?

In that disciplinary sense, every field in the social sciences has a problem to some degree. Economics, even has a problem about the conflict between neoclassical economics and the various branches of this discipline, which internally, has become even more complex. They don't beat their breast quite as much about this as sociologists, but if you talk to anybody in the field they will say: “Well, we have no unity, we have no consensus; it's splitting up into too many specializations.” We find the same kind of talk in sociology. Realistically, I think that sociology can probably be best compared with political science, in the sense that it is solidly established in the university system, so its organization is solid and its professional association is solid. Despite the conflict I mentioned earlier, it is recognized in the agencies that give money to the field, it's recognized by publishers as being a field, and no one seems to be deserting it.

Political scientists themselves are deeply split in three ways. In the '50s and '60s, you had the empirical impulsive behavioral political science, and the split between theoretical and behavioral sciences; then you had a great extension of political science in comparative politics. Then most recently, political science has borrowed a great deal of techniques and assumptions from economics pertaining to rational theory, a field that is deeply divided between the older institutional analysis and the organizational lack of unity as well. Psychology has been splintered for a long time into many sub-departments; they don't fight with each other but they're equally complex: psychoanalysis, behavioral science, developmental psychology, experimental psychology, work on rats, work on cognition, work on emotion, etc., it's all subdivided; most departments are in effect three or four departments but they keep an organizational unity which is not necessarily split.

DHAOUADI: Are cognitive psychologists currently leading in the discipline of psychology?

SMELSER: As Editor with Paul Baltes of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences and Behavioral Sciences*, although we have psychology represented in the Encyclopedia as one of the sub-fields of social behavioral sciences, we give one part to cognitive, another part to developmental and social psychology and another to applied sciences including group therapy and clinical psychology and applied psychology. And so that's the kind of common division among the three. Cognitive psychology is certainly most vital and has grown most rapidly and has more links to neuroscience. But, nonetheless, there's a lot of diversity.

The field that is the worst off in terms of internal division and crisis is anthropology. Anthropology is much more influenced by the postmodernist movement; it is divided according to whether or not it wants to be a social science. It is one of the most fundamental divisions. In sociology, most people now still agree it should be a social science; they disagree on how applied or how oriented to social reforms it should be, but the depth of the division is much greater in anthropology than in sociology.

DHAOUADI: Besides anthropology being divided into physical and socio-cultural anthropology, does this field include other subdivisions?

SMELSER: This division has been deepened with cultural anthropology being on one side, and physical and archaeological on the other. Linguistics

is somewhere there – linguistic anthropology. However, cultural anthropology is, now by far, the largest part of anthropology; itself now split on whether it wants to be scientific and empirical in its orientation, or nearly philosophical relativistic and reflective, and in fact, anti-scientific. The depth of the division in anthropology among cultural or social anthropology is very, very severe. Some departments here at Stanford even have decided to make two anthropology departments. Some think they cannot live in the same department because they cannot agree on certain basic points. Due to this conflict, we have a department of cultural anthropology and a department of anthropological science. The administration has nothing to do with it. Although this conflict hasn't extended into other psychology departments, this division is being felt.

DHAOUADI: So in a sense there really are divisions and subdivisions, within the social sciences. According to Emmanuel Wallerstein's *The End of the World as We Know It*, the crisis of sociology is attributed to the epistemological foundation of this discipline. Wallerstein is in favor of a reunification of the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. Could this fix the crisis of Behavioral Social Sciences?

SMELSER: Now, you see I am of the belief that we are beyond the point of thinking about a fix. The diversity of inquiry and style is so deep that we will have to live with it. Although at one time, I myself was a fan of a unified social science, but I think that now it is a hopeless dream that will not happen. I have been strongly committed to continuing the vitality of the scientific impulse, the scientific method ... our whole future lies in our commitment to the scientific mission ... but that we should not look for uniformity or even unity in that. In order to make discoveries we need that diversity. As a sociologist, I have done more work to promote continuity among the fields than practically anybody in the field, but I don't have it as a dream. I would never write the same book that Wallerstein wrote calling for this kind of unification. There may be a paradox in what I say, but it's my honest position.

DHAOUADI: Would reunification of the epistemology of the social sciences with that of the natural sciences be good for the scientific credibility of the field?

SMELSER: There is a double movement on that. I think my remarks apply to this country more than anywhere else. From the standpoint of sup-

port and need for the social sciences in the larger society, and just because of the nature of the society in which we live, I see that growing greater all the time. There is no phenomenon that does not have a human side to it. People I know from the natural and life sciences 30 years ago were indifferent to the human dimension, in their way of finding out scientific truth. I find a greater openness now, among those within our own staff at the Center. I'm not sure if you are concerned, or pretended to have a unity that wasn't there. That is, theoretical unity, for instance, couldn't describe the reality of the field. My theory is very pragmatic. You do the very best work you can, become as focused as you can without being biased. We make every effort to reconcile differences of interpretation of the dimension of the problem, but we know that we'll never get there. If we lack credibility, then only a certain percentage of that is our fault. I do not have a deep worry about the centrality of the social sciences in the larger world. They have to be there, but I do not think that they have a smooth or easy relationship with society, or that we will have professional peace among ourselves. I really feel it's an imperfect world. It will be imperfect if we like it or not.

DHAOUADI: I have studied at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio), where I got my B.A. in psychology and M.A. in sociology. I received my Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Montreal in Canada, so based on this academic background in my Arab-Islamic culture, I have the impression that modern behavioral and social sciences tend to emphasize the animalistic nature of human behavior. It seems to me there is less emphasis on those things that make the human species really unique. I understand why there is such emphasis. This is due largely to the basic epistemology of Evolutionary Theory. I published a long study on this issue both in English and Arabic where I showed how it makes quite a difference in our assumptions, concepts, findings when we study the human actors as apes, rats, pigeons, or as real social actors distinguished by the tremendous set of Cultural Symbols (CS): language, thought, beliefs, knowledge/science, laws, values, norms, myths. What are your thoughts on social science's emphasis on the animalistic side of human behavior?

SMELSER: I think your characterization is more accurately applied to psychology than it is to the other social sciences because of their long tradition of animal experimentation. It may apply to some degree to anthropology with their interest in Evolution and their considerable study of other mammals. I would never think that sociology would be guilty of this charge

as the other disciplines. Sociologists above all have focused on human institutions and behavior within those institutions and they share with anthropology an emphasis on the cultural dimension of social life, and in fact when the work of E. O. Wilson on sociobiology came out, the sociologists were basically unaffected by this work and thought it was not relevant. There is a very small level of interest and that interest on the evolutionary side of life had really not characterized sociology in the first 50 years or half century from its beginnings in the 1890s. The interest in Evolution, and therefore, in nonhuman societies was much greater than it is now. So my response to your question regarding social science's overemphasis on the animalistic side of human behavior applies to certain sciences more than it does to others.

DHAOUADI: Talking about sociobiology, I have been working since early 1990s on what I call Cultural Symbols (CS). Through CS, humans are categorically distinguished from the rest of the living species. While in Malaysia (1994-97), I asked myself why we humans live, on the average, longer than the other living species? Then I looked for a credible hypothesis. CS came out to be a compelling legitimate hypothesis. As a species, we are distinguished from the other species by CS, as well as by a longer lifespan. So my hypothesis: there may be a relationship between human CS and the longer human lifespan.

The sciences of biology and physiology tell us that humans reach their maximum biophysiological growth, strength and fitness when they are 25 years old. But at that age, we can hardly say that humans reach their full maturity on the CS level. Mature intellectual human thinking, for instance, hardly begins at that age and it continues its development and maturation well beyond the age of forty. Likewise, a full-blown human deep religious experience and understanding of religious, philosophical and mystical matters does usually take place at the later stage of one's long life. In short, Cultural Symbols need a longer time to be fully developed, expanded and deepened. This legitimates the need for human beings to have a longer lifespan than the other living species that are deprived quantitatively and qualitatively from the human CS. So my thesis reverses sociobiology's perspective. The time required for CS to be fully developed has designed, so to speak, the human genes/biology in such a way that fulfills the legitimate needs of a longer lifespan for human beings.

SMELSER: Well, what you are saying is not inconsistent with Evolutionary theory It is not that we have lived longer because of institutions (like families, political systems, market systems), but (because) of the same interaction of the differential survival of those individuals who do live longer has been passed on biologically, and is in fact, important for the social and cultural side to have that continuity. The human species does dedicate a tremendous amount of energy to reproducing itself generation after generation; those generations that are half as long would be at a tremendous disadvantage in terms of allocation of energy: it is a great loss if when they just become socialized, they die. It's a very interesting idea you have; I've not thought of it. I think you should continue with this thought.

DHAOUADI: Now if we can go back a little bit to sociology and my research on American sociology. I have read a great number of articles and a few books on the discipline of sociology. For instance, I read your book *Problematics of Sociology* (1997) as well as Emmanuel Wallerstein's *The End of the World as We Know It* (2000). I read your recent article in the *Annual Review of Sociology* (2000) and also your *Introduction to Handbook of Sociology* (1988). I would appreciate your thoughts on the assessment of the state of American sociology.

SMELSER: There are two directions to answer your question: three directions that have perhaps been cultivated to increase what you call the credibility of sociology. First, you have to develop methodology that gives greater vitality to social sciences. Surveys and statistical ways help establish causality, which is our business. The second way goes in fact somewhere in the direction of what you were talking about with regard to Wallerstein's concerns. I think there has been an unfortunate decline in theory. Now, theory is scattered all over and I think we need to move back in the direction of a Parsonian grand idea of unity, but more to address a higher level of application of what we are doing, to look for continuity, and theoretical synthesis, rather than systems that also will lend a greater rationale to the otherwise quite dispersed flood of empirical information that comes out of scientific research, so that there has to be a Middle and Higher Range Theory. Thirdly, I believe that despite the pressure of sociology to come up with data and findings that are relevant to social reform and social problems, the more partisan that sociologists continue to be when presenting a political point of view, the less credibility it serves. All you do is get in the same field with the politicians and you get discredited for being par-

tisan rather than being scientific. The great split in sociology from the beginning has been between social science and social reform. This may be unpopular for me to say this, but I think that we have to put greater emphasis on neutral sociology, because if we talk only about partisan division, we're just in the same political battle as everybody else. If we can add something by way of knowledge, by way of insight, by way of discrediting other knowledge without necessarily having a political agenda, that would be a third tradition. I'm not saying that all of this will happen but you asked my opinion, and these are the three directions.

DHAOUADI: Well, am I correct in concluding that in a sense, you are saying that sociologists should not be politically committed?

SMELSER: Well, you can do anything you want as a person, but from the standpoint of the practice of your profession, I still think that the disinterested and objective approach as to empirical phenomena is still the only way you will survive. If everything gets politicized it's all over because you're just another group in the political arena. You don't gain credibility in that way. You gain credibility with people who agree with you, and you lose credibility with people who do not.

DHAOUADI: Well, didn't C. Wright Mills have passionate and radical ideas?

SMELSER: You see, I don't think Mills is a radical as your question implies. You see, when he wrote his very last book, called *Listen Yankee* (1960), it was about Cuba; he was very sympathetic about the revolutionary vision of Castro; very anti-American. That book has no influence whatsoever but everyone thought well, Mills is just putting out his own views. The parts of Mills that are more important and relevant, and less radical, are his own empirical work. Based on his book on white-collar workers, and then his critique of both radical empirism and grand theory in sociological imagination ... on both scores, I think he had gained credibility. Then, it turned out to have some negative language, and although it was polemical in that it was directed to specific individuals like Parsons, the idea was to make your empirical research relevant to issues of social concern. That's fine and positive. There was a disagreement with what he had to say when he stepped over and simply became a radical spokesman.

DHAOUADI: As social scientists we have a poor record in predicting individual and collective behavior. The fall of the Soviet Union was a total surprise for most of the social scientists. Doesn't this mean that there is a lot of unpredictability about human behavior and social action? Doesn't this require a new notion of the human social actor whose behavior is more prone to be affected by cultural symbols and even metaphysical factors?

SMELSER: In a way, one answer to your question is in fact, psychological. Not to say, well, there is uncertainty in the world and reality, has its own predictability models. We have to devise our own predictive models about such a complex reality. We should increase our level of understanding and level of precision of prediction but never to try to build up the absolutely precise laws. Well, we haven't been able to do that. The problem then is to mobilize probable models of predicting behavior. It is hardly an excuse for social scientists to say they have a hard time to predict because the phenomena they study are complex. That does help the advancement of those sciences. I think we have to turn our heads right back to our own "prime" stones ... our own laboratories and our own work, but never lose sight that in fact, we are dealing with multiple variables. Since we are dealing with individuals who are influenced by these complex variables in different ways, we can increase our understanding within this framework.

DHAOUADI: As Director of the Center, are you a sociologist or a behavioral scientist?

SMELSER: More of a generalist, both. Because it is an institution of interdisciplinary commitment, I don't press my own personal sociological interest forward, and because people who are here for any given time represent several disciplines, I do my best to be on good terms with all of them. The commitment to social sciences is very strong. It has always been true in my case. I have never strayed directly from my field, and the editing of *The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences and Behavioral Sciences* is just another example of being spread out into different areas.

DHAOUADI: Who are the four American sociologists you consider very important?

SMELSER: They are Peter Blau, James Coleman, William J. Wilson, and Charles Tilly.